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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000721

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SUBJECT: JOURNALISTS ASSESS IRAQ'S PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor Steve Walker for Reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Local and international media gave a mixed press freedom grade to Iraq's January 31 provincial elections. While many journalists cited the event as a noteworthy step forward in the country's push toward greater freedom of the press, they also complained that overly restrictive policies on the part of the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) limited their ability to fully cover the voting. Over 2,600 Iraqi journalists and more than 400 members of the international press corps visited the 78 polling sites IHEC opened to the media. Despite some isolated reports of harassment and intimidation, overall we received positive accounts from journalists who covered the event and from local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who monitored it. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Based on discussions with numerous Iraqi and international journalists who visited polling sites on Election Day, as well as with representatives from various press freedom NGOs such as the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the Iraqi Journalist Rights Defending Association (IRJDA), the Journalistic Freedoms Observatory (JFO) and the DRL-funded International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) who monitored the event, the media had unprecedented access to polling stations during the January 31 provincial elections. IHEC officially authorized over 2,600 local journalists and more than 400 international members of the press to visit 78 specifically designated polling sites throughout the country, including 16 in Baghdad. According to one Iraqi journalist, only one polling site was open to the press in the previous elections (held in 2005 to elect the Council of Representatives), leading him to term these a "marked improvement." In addition, many of our contacts report having been detained and held for days in 2005 when they attempted to enter polling sites. This time, they were able to move freely from one location to the next and had free access to IHEC officials and voters at each site.

¶3. (U) Two weeks before the elections, IHEC lifted a requirement that all journalists covering the event sign a binding 14-page code of conduct ([http://www.ihec.iq/content/file/cmc/cmc\\_code\\_conduct\\_media\\_elections\\_en.pdf](http://www.ihec.iq/content/file/cmc/cmc_code_conduct_media_elections_en.pdf)) published by the Communications and Media Commission. Initially required as a prerequisite to obtaining a press badge, the document had caused a minor uproar among local and international media alike and was only discarded after IHEC received numerous complaints from members of the press. Our journalist interlocutors expressed satisfaction that the code was not instituted as a condition to covering the elections, and recommended that in the future IHEC involve the press corps in media-related decision-making at an early stage of the planning process.

¶4. (SBU) Despite this generally positive assessment, there were some complaints. Many journalists expressed frustration with IHEC, complaining that the accrediting procedures were cumbersome and IHEC officials nonresponsive to questions and complaints. In addition, almost all of the reporters with whom we spoke were upset about being restricted to

IHEC-designated polling sites. This lack of unfettered media access "arouses suspicions" among the Iraqi public that the voting might be rigged, according to one of our contacts. Most journalists did not accept IHEC's assertion that the restrictions were in place due to security concerns and plan to lobby IHEC to eliminate these constraints for future elections.

15. (SBU) We also received reports of isolated incidents of harassment against the press. Many of these occurred on the "special needs" voting day (January 28) when prisoners, soldiers and the infirm were able to cast their vote. The most widely reported occurrence took place at the Ministry of Justice-run Minah prison in Basrah where approximately 15 cameramen attempted to film inmates casting their votes, despite strict IHEC guidance prohibiting the photographing of prisoners' faces. Guards responded with force, resulting in some broken equipment. This was not the only alleged occurrence of media press harassment, but our contacts doubt that there was a coordinated GoI plan to disrupt media access to polling sites.

16. (C) Comment: Although our local media contacts were frustrated with their inability to visit any polling site of their choice, they praised the process in general and were hopeful that increased access on Election Day presaged a more open approach in general by their government towards the media. Iraq still has quite a distance to go on press freedom, but our journalist contacts share our assessment that the lack of any GOI targeted campaign to prevent the press from doing its job during the provincial elections is a positive step forward.

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